



Can you see the Star?

A Journey through Advent



Why Advent...?

Is your list of things that need to get done before Christmas overwhelming? Or, maybe you are facing a Christmas you would rather not. Maybe you are far away from family and friends this year, or your life circumstances make Christmas feel hollow or overly nostalgic. Or, perhaps you are longing for Christmas to include opportunities to ponder the mystery of what the birth of Jesus really means for you, for your dear ones, and for our world.

Whatever it is that weighs on your heart and mind, Advent is a good place to be. It helps us pause and take one more look at the big Story we find ourselves in and why it matters. The big Story becomes part of our stories and tells about the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus through the days of Christmas, Lent, Good Friday, Easter and Ascension. Pentecost marks the time we shift our focus from the story of Jesus to the Story of God's People in the world, and we realize how our lives are woven into the rich history of the Christian Church, and how FBC fits into that wider narrative. But Advent is where the Story begins...with our waiting and with our Lord's coming.

It is a season of fasting before the feasting.

A time to prepare for the celebrations.

A time to ready our hearts.

A time to name the darkness into which we are longing for the light to dawn.

A time to recognize the wars that wage in our world,

and in our communities,

and even in our very souls.

It is a season of waiting for the Prince of Peace.

The whole Story of God's People is one of waiting expectantly for the coming of God. Advent literally means "coming." We are a people who live between the "comings" of Jesus. We find

ourselves between the first Advent (Christmas), when we received the best gift of all, Jesus Himself, and the second Advent at which time Jesus will make all things new. We live in an in-between time. And the season of Advent is an in-between time, too. It marks the end and the beginning. We wait for the consummation of all things, but we also wait with the people of Israel (it turns out that even the Story of God's people is a long one!) for the coming of Messiah. We wait for both the ending and the beginning. We wait in hope.

Andrea Tisher
Director of Music and Worship

Following the star

Although Advent comes at the end of a calendar year, it marks the beginning of the Church year. And rightly so, because this is where the promise of our salvation takes shape and meets us...in a baby. Advent gives us a chance to step into the awe and mystery of the incarnation, God becoming flesh and dwelling among us. It gives us a chance to open our hearts to Jesus in waiting, to ask him to place on us a burning seal of his love, so that we will live with a renewed hope, passion and adoration.

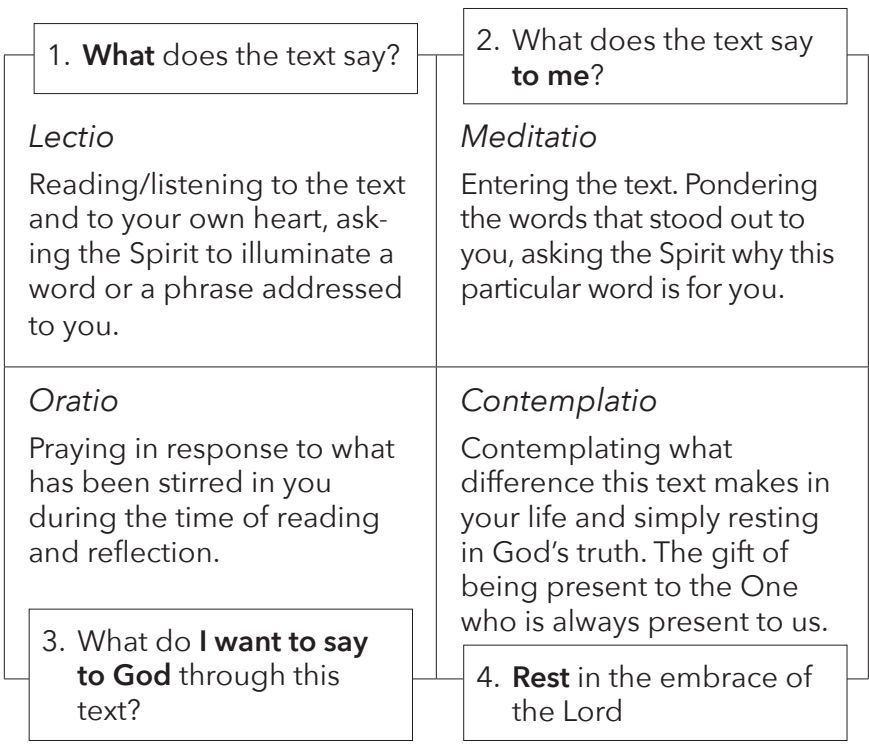
In the fall, we followed Jesus encounters using an inductive Bible study approach, learning to engage the Scriptures with our mind and paying attention to how we ought to apply them in our lives. In this season of Advent, I am inviting you to try an over 1,500-year-old way of reading the Bible, called *lectio divina*.

Lectio divina has many names: "divine reading" (literal meaning), "spiritual reading," "scripture prayer," "contemplative Bible reading." I personally like calling it "*holy listening*." Whatever the name, it is essentially a way to prayerfully engage Scripture in order to hear the Lord's personal word to you. With roots in Judaism, *lectio divina* was firmly established in the early church and later became a central practice in Western monasticism. Its importance to individual spiritual formation has been rediscovered in the 20th century.

The ultimate goal of *lectio divina* is not more information, but a closer union with God. Advent seems an appropriate time to try this practice. John 1:14 says, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." Guess what, the Word still wants to dwell in and among us through the words of the Scripture. By letting the written Word speak into our lives and transform us, we are allowing the Creative Word to incarnate in us, become part of our flesh, part of us so that we can become more like Jesus.

Holy listening is about letting God speak first. How do we do that? The practice of *lectio divina* has a certain rhythm and consists of 4 building blocks. The rhythm is simple: we alternate between the hearing of Scripture and the time of silent reflection. We begin and end our *lectio* with prayer.

The four blocks (or movements) are not always sequential and linear (since we are talking about having a conversation with God!), but there is a logic behind the structure. One element flows into the other.



Have you noticed the Christmas artwork on the cover of this guide and around the church? Dixie has intentionally created this image to reflect our need together with the scholars of the East to follow the star of Jesus in order to worship Him (Mt 2:2), and through our life of worship be so transformed that we ourselves be shining like the stars (Php 2:15).

The texts selected for *lectio divina* follow the texts of the Readings and Carols service and the sermon passages telling us the story of our predicament and God's steadfast love. There is a star of Jesus in each of these texts; it comes as God's promise to dispel the darkness. We are neither forsaken nor forgotten. There is always a promise, always a star: in our shame in the garden, with Abraham on the mount in Moriah, in our exile with Israel, in our surrender and joy with Mary, in our following the shepherds and the Magi, in our meeting Jesus, our God become flesh, as a baby and in His baptism.

Lectio divina might be a new experience for some of us and might seem like a risky enterprise. I invite us all to take the risk. God speaks to us in multiple ways. If an analytical inductive Bible study helps us get to the heart of the text, the *holy listening* allows the text, the Word of God, to get to the heart of us. We are not trying to master the Scripture, we are inviting the Word to come and speak to us, to transform and to master us.

It is a risky enterprise to follow the star of Jesus.

May He give us the grace of meeting Him in this season.

Yelena Pakhomova
Connection Group Ministry coordinator

THE PROCESS OF GROUP *LECTIO DIVINA*¹

Prayer of preparation

- Find a comfortable position. Sit in silence, close your eyes and let your body relax.
- Focus on God and open your heart by praying “Come, Lord Jesus, come”, or “Holy Spirit, guide me into the truth you’ve prepared for me today.” During the group *lectio* your leader will facilitate the prayer.

1. Lectio:

Listen to the Word of God and for a word from God to you

- The biblical passage will be read twice. Listen attentively and prayerfully. Is there a word or a phrase that jumps out at you or speaks directly to you?
- During a short period of silence after the second reading, hold this word or phrase in the forefront of your mind, letting it speak to your heart. You can repeat it silently or softly to yourself to remain focused.
- When the leader invites you to share your word or phrase, say only that word or phrase without elaborating on it.
- Feel free to say “I pass” at any time in the sharing process.

2. Meditatio:

Reflect on how this word touches your life

- The passage is read again. Enter the text using your imagination. See yourself as a participant of the events. What do you see, hear or smell?
- During the time of silence think about the word, metaphor or part of the passage that spoke directly to you. What about it tugs at your heart?
- Focus on why the Holy Spirit might have chosen these words to speak to you today.
- You might want to journal your reflections during the time of silence, this helps with being still and attentive.

¹ This would take between 20 and 30 minutes, and it can be used for individual practice

- When the leader invites the group to share their reflections, please share briefly the connections between the word or phrase and your life.

3. Oratio:

Respond to the text and to what you have received in prayer

- Prayer is the natural response arising from listening and meditating on the Word of God. How are you invited to respond? Is there any invitation to act or to be in a different way? What grace do you need for that?
- You can pray for each other out loud, or the group can just spend 3-5 minutes in silent prayer.
- Feel free to journal your prayer, or at any time during *lectio divina*.
- ACTS model can be used: **A**doration (praise and worship God for how He revealed himself in the reading), **C**onfession (acknowledgement and repentance), **T**hanksgiving (thank God for forgiveness and for what the Spirit has revealed to you today), **S**upplication (ask for the grace you need at the moment, bring your requests to God).

4. Contemplatio:

Rest in gratitude and in the words of truth and hope

- The passage is read the final time.
- In 2-3 minutes of silence following the reading, simply sit in the presence of the Lord feeling his tender love and embrace. You do not have to do anything. It is just a space to experience the closeness and embrace of the Lord.
- The leader can say a closing prayer in the end to round off the group's time together.²

² Sometimes groups debrief their experience of *lectio*. Each weekly session can be lead by a different group member.

Malcolm Guite

O Emmanuel¹

O come, O come, and be our God-with-us
O long-sought With-ness for a world without,
O secret seed, O hidden spring of light.
Come to us Wisdom, come unspoken Name
Come Root, and Key, and King, and holy Flame,
O quickened little wick so tightly curled,
Be folded with us into time and place,
Unfold for us the mystery of grace
And make a womb of all this wounded world.
O heart of heaven beating in the earth,
O tiny hope within our hopelessness
Come to be born, to bear us to our birth,
To touch a dying world with new-made hands
And make these rags of time our swaddling bands.

1 <https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/tag/advent-antiphons/>

First Week of Advent: Genesis 3:8-15

A leader guides the process. Have everyone find a comfortable position, relax their body and breathing, and prepare their hearts to listen attentively to the Lord. Start with a minute of silence to let go of the anxieties and worries. Be still and know that Jesus is with you and has been with you in all the challenges of your day. Now He invites you to spend some time with Him in His Word.

Prayer: Invite the Holy Spirit to come and guide your experience.

“The Spirit of truth, come and guide us. Open our hearts for the work of transformation you seek to do in us. Help us hear.”

Lectio - Read & listen for a word or a phrase

Have everyone close their eyes to focus on hearing the spoken Word.

The leader can say, “I am going to slowly read the passage aloud two times. Listen for a word or a phrase that particularly catches your attention.”

Slowly read Genesis 3:8-15 for the first time and allow a few moments of silence in between the readings.

Read it again.

Spend 2-3 minutes in silence, and then invite people to speak out loud that one word or phrase, which stood out to them.¹

Meditatio - Reflect on how this passage or the word/phrase that jumped out at you connect to your life

During this third reading of the passage invite the group to enter the scene with their senses and emotions.

The leader might say, “As I read the passage again, imagine yourself in the story. What sounds and smells do you notice? Who and what do you see? What is going on in this story? Who do you identify with? What emotions do you feel?”

1 Feel free to “pass” at any point in the sharing.

Slowly read Genesis 3:8-15.

Spend 3 minutes in silence reflecting on how the word or phrase connects to your life. What might God be saying to you through this passage?

Invite the group to briefly share what spoke to them personally and why.

Oratio - Respond to what you have heard from the Lord

Take any thoughts, feelings or convictions that came up during your meditation and sharing, and present them to the Lord in prayer. Feel free to pray out loud or silently for 3-5 min. Feel free to pray for each other.

Contemplatio - Rest in God's truth

Read Genesis 3:8-15 for the final time. You may say, "Receive and rest in the words of the Lord."

Prayer

The leader can say a closing prayer or the group can pray the Lord's Prayer together.

Debrief

It might be helpful to talk about your experience today, e.g. what you have found difficult, what you liked.

Genesis 3:8-15 (NIV)

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

But the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?"

He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."

And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"

The man said, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it."

Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?"

The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

So the Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this,

"Cursed are you above all livestock
and all wild animals!

You will crawl on your belly
and you will eat dust
all the days of your life.

And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel."

What is *contemplation* about after all?

"It means getting the text into our muscles and bones, our oxygen-breathing lungs and blood-pumping heart.

Contemplation means submitting to the biblical revelation, taking it within ourselves, and then living it unpretentiously, without fanfare.

Contemplation means living what we read, not wasting any of it or hoarding any of it, but using it up in living. It is life formed by God's revealing word, God's word read and heard, meditated and prayed. The contemplative life is not a special kind of life; it is the Christian life, nothing more but also nothing less. But *lived*.

Contemplation is not another thing added on to our reading and meditation and praying, but the coming together of God's revelation and our response, an unself-conscious following of Jesus, a Jesus-coherent life. It is not thinking about God, not asking continuously "what would Jesus do?" but jumping into the river; not strategizing the success of my life but just being myself, my Christ-in-me-life; not calculating effects but accepting and submitting to on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven conditions.

We won't take over. We won't insist on measured progress. We won't compete. Having read and meditated and prayed, and continuing to read and meditate and pray, we will step back and bless, love and obey, and breathe "let it be to me according to your word." Relax and receive."

~Eugene H. Peterson
Eat This Book: a Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading
Eerdmans, 2006

Second Week of Advent: Isaiah 9:1-7

Take a couple of minutes to prepare for the scripture prayer experience. Sit comfortably. Allow your body and breathing to relax. Quiet your heart before the Lord, bring to mind those moments of your day when the Lord was present to you. Thank Him.

Prayer

Close your eyes. Focus your attention on Jesus quietly repeating a simple prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus, come. Let me be present to you with all my mind, heart and strength."

Lectio - what does the text say?

The leader will slowly and contemplatively read Isa 9:1-7. Pay attention to what is going on in the text. What is it about? What does it say about the God you believe in?

The leader will read the passage again. Listen for a word or a phrase that stands out to you.

Spend 2-3 minutes in silence. The leader will invite the group to share out loud that word or phrase which stood out to them.¹

Meditatio - what does the text say to me?

During the third reading of the passage reflect on how this Scripture speaks into your life.

The leader will slowly read Isa 9:1-7.

Spend 3 minutes in silence reflecting on what God might be saying to you personally through this passage. What makes this word of God good news for your life today?

Invite the group to briefly share what might have spoken to them personally and why.

1 Feel free to "pass" at any point in the sharing.

Oratio - what would you like to say to God as a response to this text?

Lift up your meditations, emotions, thoughts and concerns coming out of this Scripture in prayer back to God. Feel free to pray out loud or silently for 3-5 min. If you feel lead, pray for each other.

*Contemplatio - rest in God's truth
(or conversion - what difference does this truth make in my life?)*

The leader will read Isa 9:1-7 for the final time. The leader might say, "Receive and rest in the words of the Lord." Or you may want to listen contemplatively inquiring of the Lord to show you where He wants you to change.

Prayer

Have someone in the group close your time together in prayer, thanking God for his faithfulness in being with you today and always.

Isaiah 9:2-7 (NIV)

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—

The people walking in darkness
 have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
 a light has dawned.

You have enlarged the nation
 and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
 as people rejoice at the harvest,
as warriors rejoice
 when dividing the plunder.

For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
 you have shattered
the yoke that burdens them,
 the bar across their shoulders,
 the rod of their oppressor.

Every warrior's boot used in battle
 and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,
 will be fuel for the fire

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.

He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.

The zeal of the Lord Almighty
will accomplish this.

What kind of “listening” are you?

“God is so far beyond us. But he came to us. The Word was made flesh. Jesus is the most complete expression of the Word in our creation. God is Word. God is communication. And we therefore are essentially a *listening*, a listening for that Word. To the extent we truly “hear” that Word, receive that Word into our being and into our lives, we participate in the Divine Being, Life, Love, Joy. Made in the image of God, we have an unlimited, an infinite potential to be like unto him.

Each of us is a certain listening, a certain openness to being, to reality, to communication. Everything that has been part of our lives since the moment of our creation has had its role in shaping the listening that we are. Objectively, of itself, the listening that we are is not good or bad, morally speaking. But it is good for us to realize that we are a certain, definable listening. It is as though my listening has a certain physical shape to it. As things come across my listening, I get only what falls within parameters of the listening that I am.It important, in truth and in reality, that I realize and accept that I am a certain limited listening.”

~M. Basil Pennington
*Lectio Divina: Renewing the Ancient Practice
of Praying the Scriptures*
The Crossroad Publishing, 1998

Third week of Advent: Genesis 22:6-18

Prayer

Close your eyes. Take a few moments of quiet to become aware of God's presence with you and in His Word that you are about to hear. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you hear. *"Speak, Lord, your servant wants to hear."*

Read – listen to what the text says

The leader will slowly read Gen 22:6-18. Pay attention to what is going on in the text, notice words and connections. What is the story about?

The leader will read the passage again. Stay alert for a word, metaphor, phrase or message that moves you or connects with your life.

Spend 2-3 minutes in silence. The leader will invite the group to share out loud that word or phrase, which stood out to you.

Reflect on what the text says to you personally

During the third reading try to picture yourself inside the story. Are you going up the mountain with Abraham? Are you looking at what's happening through Isaac's eyes?

Leader will slowly read the passage.

Spend 3-5 minutes in silence reflecting on what God is saying to you.

What comes to your mind in connection with this story? What makes this word of God good news for your life today? Ask the Holy Spirit to illumine the passage to you and show you how you can internalize it and make it your own.

Journal your reflections.

The leader will invite the group to briefly share what might have spoken to them and why.

Respond - talk to God about what has been stirred in you and where you need His grace

Your reflections and sharing will lead to prayer. Share what's on your heart, praise God and express your gratitude, ask for healing or a special grace you need at the moment. Feel free to pray out loud or silently for 3-5 min. If you feel lead, pray for each other lifting up what has being shared.

Rest in God's truth

The leader will read the passage for the final time. Receive and rest in the words and good promises of the Lord.

Prayer

After a few minutes of silence one person can pray to finish this time in the Word, or the leader can simply close with "Amen".

Genesis 22:6-18 (NIV)

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife.

As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?"

"Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.

"The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.

When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.

But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

"Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided."

The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, "I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

Transforming power of prayer...but who is doing the work?

“Prayer would not be called a spiritual practice if it did not play a central role in the deep inner work of transformation. ...you might wonder how the ancient monastic practice of *lectio divina* connects to this transformational dimension of prayer. Anything coming to us from a monastery might strike you as quaint but irrelevant to twenty-first-century Christians living busy lives in the world. But this could not be further from the truth... this ancient prayer practice was developed expressly for transformational purposes. It was understood as a way of opening ourselves to God so we might be touched, awakened, realigned, integrated and healed. Or, we could say, it is a way of opening ourselves to God so we might be born again and again in a continuing series of conversions that together constitute this grand process of transformation. This is precisely the gift that *lectio divina* offers us. It leads us to a way of understanding and practicing prayer that is vastly different from how most of us understand and practice it, because it leads us to opening ourselves to God so God can pray in and through us.”

~David G. Benner
Opening to God: Lectio Divina and Life as Prayer
IVP, 2010

Fourth week of Advent: Luke 1:46-55

Take a couple of minutes to quiet your heart. Think of those moments in your day when the Lord was mindful of you. Remember the times when you were particularly aware of His presence.

Centering prayer

Close your eyes. Center your attention on Jesus quietly repeating a simple prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus."

Prayer as attending¹

Slowly read Luke 1:46-55. Pay attention to the words and metaphors Mary uses, what connections she makes in her song with Israel's history.

What does the text say about the God you believe in?

Slowly read the passage again.

Sit in stillness for 2-3 minutes, opening yourself in attentiveness and expectancy to a word or a phrase God has for you in this text. Share or write it down.

Prayer as pondering

Slowly read the passage again. Notice the movements of your heart. What thoughts arise in you?

Spend 3 minutes in silence reflecting on what God might be saying to you personally through this passage. What makes this word of God good news for your life today?

Allow the word or a phrase you are pondering in your mind engage your heart.

Share or write down your reflections on how Mary's song touches you.

Prayer as responding

With faith and openness offer your worded or unworded prayer to God in response to what has been stirred within you. Feel free to journal, but a prayer does not always have

¹ David G. Benner categories for *lectio divina* from *Opening to God: Lectio Divina and Life as Prayer*

to be worded, lighting a candle or going for a walk are also prayerful responses.

Prayer as being

Read Luke 1:46-55 for the final time and allow yourself a few moments of stillness to be in God's presence and to rest in God's promise. This is a prayer of presence, a gift of being with and in God.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord. Amen.

Luke 1:46-55 (NIV)

And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors."

Sanctified imagination?

"The simplest and most basic way to meditate upon the text of Scripture is through the imagination...This is a wonderful aid as we come to the text of Scripture. We are desiring to see, to hear, to touch the biblical narrative. In this simple way we begin to enter the story and make it our own. We move from detached observation to active participation.

Using the imagination also brings the emotions into the equation, so that we come to God with both mind and heart. It is vitally important to understand the Scripture intellectually, but if we have not felt it emotionally, we have not fully understood it."

~Richard Foster

Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home
Harper One, 1992

Christmas day: Luke 2:8-20

Set aside 15-20 minutes for scripture prayer. Take a few moments to become present to the Lord in stillness and quiet. Take a few deep breaths putting aside the distractions and inviting Jesus to be with you in this time. Say a short prayer.

Reading

Slowly read Luke 2:8-20 out loud. Pay attention to the theme of the passage, choice of words and emotions described. Who are the main characters and what do they do?

Read the passage again and spend a few minutes listening to the Holy Spirit minister God's Word to you. What *one word or phrase* especially touches your heart?

Reflecting

Slowly read the passage again. Imagine you are one of the shepherds visited by the angel. What terrifies you about the angel's sudden visit? What makes you go and see for yourself what the Lord has told you about?

Try seeing the story through the eyes of Mary. What does God invite you to treasure in your heart?

What *emotions* do you have after reading this familiar passage? What *personal struggle or longing in your life today* is God speaking into?

You might want to journal your reflections during the time of silence; this helps with being still and attentive.

Responding

Talk to God about anything that has been stirred in you during your reflections. Write a prayer of adoration. Thank Him for the gift of Jesus that makes us not to be afraid.

Receiving

Read Luke 2:8-20 one last time. Receive what Christ has for you today. Let this word of God take root in your very being, become a treasure of your heart.

Luke 2:8-20 (NIV)

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Invitation to friendship

“One of the most amazing statements in the Bible – and there are lots of amazing statements in the Bible – are those words of Jesus to us: ‘I no longer call you servants, but friends.’ This is almighty God speaking, God himself, the Lord of all creation. And he says it to you and to me: ‘Friend.’

Friend! What is more wonderful, more precious than a true friend, one who is there for us? One with whom we can share anything and everything, one with whom there is full communion and communication. Our communication with our Divine Friend needs to be a two-way street. And if we are smart, we let God get the first word in. For he surely has a lot more that is worth saying.

This is precisely what *lectio divina* is: letting our Divine Friend speak to us through his inspired and inspiring Word. And yes, of course, it includes our response to that Word, to his communication to us through that Word. *Lectio* is meeting with a friend, a very special Friend who is God; listening to him, really listening; and responding, in intimate prayer and in the way we take that Word with us and let it shape our lives.”

~M. Basil Pennington
*Lectio Divina: Renewing the Ancient Practice
of Praying the Scriptures*
The Crossroad Publishing, 1998

First week of the New Year: Matthew 2:1-12

Prepare: Assume a comfortable position. Set aside 15-25 minutes for this exercise in prayerful scripture engagement. Relax and focus on God. Let go of the worries and concerns you are bringing into the New Year. Remember God is already there and will be walking before you. Open yourself to His word and ask Him to let it sink deep into your heart and transform you.

Read/Listen: Slowly read Mt. 2:2-11 aloud a couple of times. Read with openness, paying close attention to what's going on in the text.

Meditate: When a word or a phrase strikes you, stop and reflect on why this particular word has touched you. How does it connect with your life? Why do you think the Holy Spirit brought this up to you? Feel free to journal your thoughts.

Pray: Can you see the star of Jesus in your present life circumstances? What moves you to worship Him? How is the shepherd of Israel also your shepherd? Pray, praise, worship...talk to the Lord of your life.

Contemplate: Read the passage one more time, pausing for a moment of silence after you read those words that have particularly touched you in your meditation.

Conclude with a short prayer of thanksgiving or praise.

Matthew 2:1-12 (NIV)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

"Scripture prayer (*lectio divina*) is based on a pattern of silence, reading, silence and reflection. The spiritual premise is that when we listen, the Lord will instruct us in His ways... Silence is used to center on Christ before the passage is read. Silence after the reading is for listening to Christ. There are no expectations. Sometimes we receive insights. Sometimes we are comforted. Sometimes we have more questions."

"Scripture prayer is not a substitute for Bible study. The Word of God is worthy of careful study. Scripture prayer is a way to allow God access to our inner being and thus instruct us in ways we might not have considered."

~MaryKate Morse
A Guidebook to Prayer: Twenty-four ways to walk with God
InterVarsity Press, 2013

"*Lectio divina* is the kind of reading in which the mind descends into the heart, and both are drawn into the love and goodness of God."

~Richard Foster
Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home
Harper One, 1992

Epiphany: Matthew 3:13-17

The word “epiphany” means “manifestation” and comes from the purpose of Christ to manifest or reveal the glory of God.

Prepare your heart by sitting quietly for a moment and becoming aware of God’s presence. Ask Jesus to give you eyes to see and ears to hear.

Read Matthew 3:13-17 aloud a couple of times. Then spend a few minutes in silence reflecting on what you have just read.

Consider what has touched your heart. How might God be teaching you through this passage? Imagine yourself standing in the crowd and watching Jesus’ baptism, what are you experiencing?

How is Jesus leading you to respond? Journal your *prayer*.

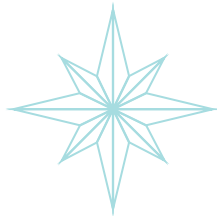
Matthew 3:13-17 (NIV)

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John.

But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”



Resources:

David G. Benner, *Opening to God: Lectio Divina and Life as Prayer*, IVP, 2010

Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, Harper One, 1992.

MaryKate Morse, *A Guidebook to Prayer: Twenty-four ways to walk with God*, IVP Books, 2013.

Richard Peace, *Contemplative Bible Reading: Experiencing God through Scripture*, Navpress, 1996.

M. Basil Pennington, *Lectio Divina: Renewing the Ancient Practice of Praying the Scriptures*, Crossroad Publishing, 1998.

Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: a Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading*, Eerdmans, 2006